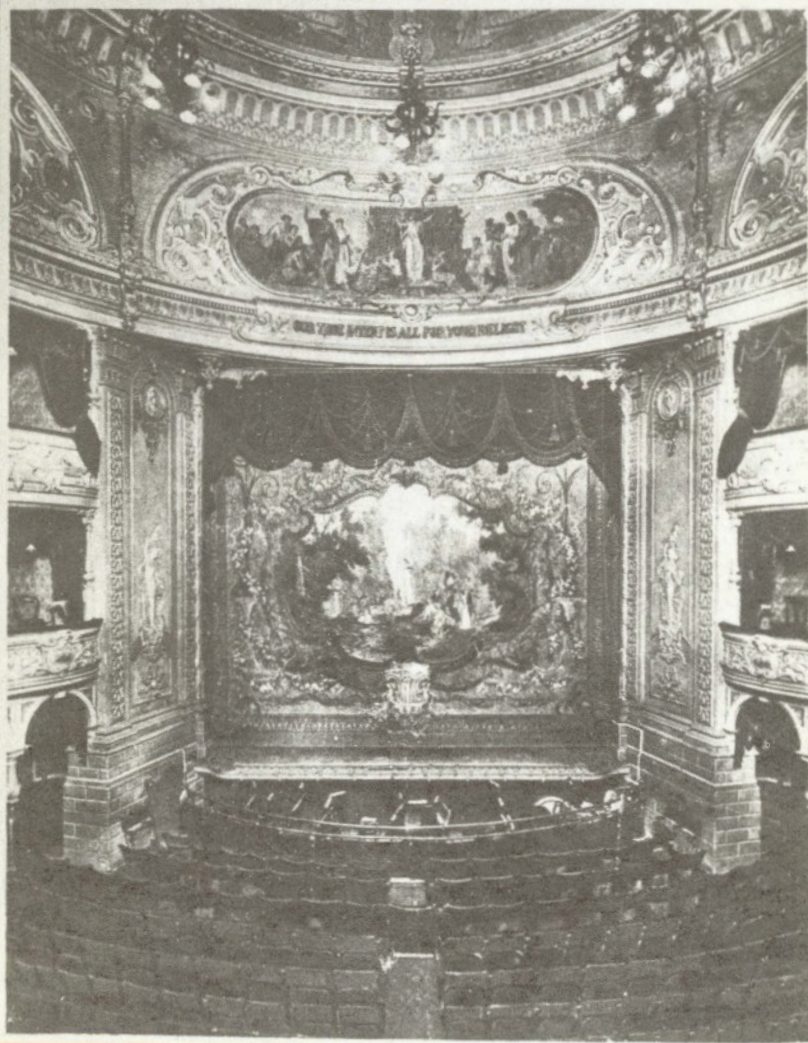


# THE PRINCE'S OF PARK ROW



Don Carleton

# BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

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*The Prince's Theatre, Bristol* is the fifty-fifth pamphlet to be published by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. The author, Don Carleton, is Information Officer in the University of Bristol and West of England correspondent for *Drama* and for *Plays and Players*. His great interest in the history of the theatre in general and of the Prince's Theatre in particular has enabled him to paint a fascinating picture of a theatre which for many years was very dear to the hearts of Bristolians.

The author wishes to acknowledge the help he has received from many Bristolians who gave him personal recollections in writing or on the telephone and who showed him memorabilia of their visits to the Prince's Theatre. He owes particular debts of gratitude to Adrian Varcoe, the distinguished Bristol variety artist, who gave him unrestricted access to his personal theatre collection which includes much Chute material; to Mr John Wreford for use of his collection of programmes; to Mr Terry Bryant for use of his unique collection of Bristoliana; to the committee and company of the Mercury Players of Bristol who presented a musical version of this material at the Little Theatre in 1977; to Mr John Coe of the *Bristol Evening Post* for much help and many kindnesses; to Mr Leonard Nott who made his notes on Mark Barraud available to him; to Mr Ken Pople who supplied information about the later career of Desmond Chute; and to the staff of the Information Office, the Arts Faculty Photographic Unit and the Theatre Collection of the University of Bristol.

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The next pamphlet in the series will be by Professor Bruce Perry and will deal with the history of the voluntary medical institutions of Bristol.

A list of pamphlets in print is given on the inside back cover. The pamphlets may be obtained from most Bristol booksellers; from the Porters' Lodge in the Wills Memorial Building; from the shop in the City Museum, or direct from Peter Harris, 74 Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol, 9.

## THE PRINCE'S THEATRE

Sunday 24 November 1940 was a typical late autumn day in Bristol. All day there were dull leaden skies with a light mist towards sunset. As darkness came there was an air-raid. Showers of incendiary and high explosive bombs fell upon the city. During the first hour 20 fires were reported and rescue services were called to 86 separate occurrences. For many hours the fires raged, their fury such that they gave the intensity of daylight to the city centre.

Overnight Bristol became a city of ruins. St. Peter's Hospital, The Old Dutch House, eight council schools, the Great Hall of the University, St. Peter's Church, Temple Church, St. Mary-le-Port Church, were destroyed and there was substantial damage in Broadmead, Baldwin Street and Queen Charlotte Street. Among the chief public buildings destroyed was the Prince's Theatre.

The Prince's Theatre had opened on 14 October 1867. On that night the new curtains were raised and the manager, James Henry Chute, stepped onto the stage. Jack Chute was an imposing man with large Dundreary whiskers. He had been an actor and had married Emily Mazzarina Macready, the half sister of the great Shakespearian actor William Macready. When his mother-in-law died he became leasee of both the Theatre Royal in King Street and the Theatre Royal in Bath. He was a man of energy, taste and ideas and he was well aware of the limitations the social milieu surrounding the King Street area imposed on the profitability of the Theatre Royal. It was not a theatre to which a gentleman might respectably bring his family.

Chute may have been impressed by the success of Hengler's Circus<sup>1</sup> which played at the Rifle Drill Hall on the site now occupied by the University Refectory. Aware of Hengler's

1. J.H. Chute and Charles Hengler were both members of the Bristol Arts Club.

success with the middle class family audience and aware also as an inhabitant of Park Row of the burgeoning suburbs of Clifton, Cotham, Horfield and Redland, he determined to build a new theatre.

Almost beside his own house stood an old mansion belonging originally to the Fudge family and dating back, in some particulars, to the 39th year of Queen Elizabeth I. It had a royal history. In 1817 Queen Charlotte had dined there as the guest of Colonel Baillie but by the eighteen-sixties it was known as the Engineers' House. Chute acquired the house and garden and with typical panache announced the building of his new theatre from the stage of his old one during the run of the pantomime.

At the time he did not even own the land. "It was then" he recalled, "a lovely lawn covered with shrubs, and trees, and natural charms." In less than eight months he built what was then one of the biggest, and possibly the biggest, theatre in the provinces. His architect was C.J. Phipps who was the leading theatrical architect of his day.<sup>2</sup>

Phipps provided Chute with a large stage 107 feet across with a proscenium opening 30 feet by 25½ feet. A feature of Phipps design was that the gallery line and the proscenium formed a perfect circle. Although some seats had an imperfect view of the stage, this did not seem to matter particularly: it was a theatre to be seen in as much as to see in. With some spectators standing it could accommodate an audience of 2,800. It had cost nearly £20,000,<sup>3</sup> a sum considered by people of the time to be excessive. To those who knew Chute it was not surprising. His aims, like his standards, were high.

When he stepped in front of the act-drop on that opening night he was justifiably proud of "the house that Jack built", and his speech was not only typical of the man but it also revealed clearly and succinctly the policy which was to govern the Prince's for all of its history. He began disarmingly: "I want the first words uttered in this building", he said, "to be words of welcome. Ladies and Gentlemen, I am most proud and happy to say you are heartily welcome".

He then recalled how the theatre had been built and introduced

2. His London theatres included His Majesty's, the Gaiety, the Prince of Wales, the Strand, the Savoy, and the Lyric. Significantly his first major commission had been the Theatre Royal, Bath.
3. Much of it raised by a mortgage.

Phipps the architect and Davis the contractor and others connected with the construction. He continued so significantly that his words are worth quoting at length:

“The stage is the lay pulpit of the people. We preach here six times a week — and preach strict morality and the principles of virtue in a more pleasing form than they are often taught elsewhere. The drama, it must be remembered, is the reflex of the age and time. Show me the habits and manners of a people and you will see them reflected on the stage. I thoroughly believe in the value of the drama and that the dramatic artist has as high a function to perform as the walkers in any other branch of art”.

His analogy with the pulpit was deliberate and challenging — actors were still not well regarded in polite society in England in the eighteen-sixties and it had been the life's wish of his wife's half-brother, the great Macready, not only to raise the artistic and production standards of the theatrical profession but to raise its moral and social standing. Macready had been forced to leave Rugby by his father's bankruptcy; he had entered the theatrical profession with reluctance and pursued it with distaste. Out of his personal shame he built a theory of the value of the drama to which he could aspire himself and help others attain. Chute was happy to assume the same perceptions as his brother-in-law and imbued his sons<sup>4</sup> with the great actor's ideas in practice and precept.

The first play offered on the opening night was *The Tempest*. It was played by the existing stock company<sup>5</sup> to full houses for four weeks — so some sixty thousand people saw it. But what Chute needed for his theatre was a continuing supply of good theatre, what is now called “good product”. Although his stock company was an unusually good one and gave many famous actors their first experience on the stage, it could not fill the theatre on a year-round basis. Good touring productions were needed, and Chute found them hard to come by. He also found it increasingly

4. Most of them were christened Macready as part of their name. Charles Kean Chute was the exception.
5. A stock company was a group of locally-contracted actors who could play as support for a visiting star or perform in their own productions, which might range from burlesque and musical theatre to high drama and Shakespeare. The Bristol company was notably good of its kind. It numbered among its alumni some of the most distinguished names in the English theatre. One of them, Ellen Terry, paid particular tribute to the excellence of the experience and training it gave her.



difficult to recruit adequate performers for his pantomimes. A conservative in such matters, he had been used to select from the best who “wrote in” as individuals. The emerging system of “agents” was not to his taste and he found himself with some rather inferior performers. The difficulties of “product” and casting he faced were supplemented by a very tragic occurrence.

His new theatre was built on the steep slope which lay below Tyndall’s Park. The mansion which had stood there enjoyed excellent views over the city and even after the theatre was built a sloping garden continued down the hill below the theatre. Open ground, where Woodland Road now runs, stood in front of it. It seemed to Chute and Phipps an ideal site, but they had missed or ignored one vital point. All the entrances and exits debouched into Park Row. On Boxing Day 1869 a large crowd drawn by the success of the first two pantomimes at the new theatre was waiting outside. The queuing system had not then been adopted, and indeed it was not introduced to Bristol until the early eighteen-nineties. When the doors for the pit and gallery opened, the crowd surged down the slope at the side of the theatre. Some of the foremost fell and the others unknowingly walked over them. There were over 40 casualties, and Mr. and Mrs. Chute helped to lay out the bodies of the fourteen dead in the lower refreshment rooms. With great presence of mind Chute ordered the performance to proceed to avoid a panic, and none of the audience knew of the tragedy until they emerged at the end.

The deaths were a blow to Chute, mentally and financially, and perhaps even morally. Safety measures were introduced. A rail separating the two entrances and a guard door were erected, but in the opinion of theatre critic G. Rennie Powell<sup>6</sup>, “neither Mr. nor Mrs. Chute ever regained their fair outlooks on life”. Powell also commented, “as the weeks slipped by it had become increasingly evident that the deterrent effect of the Boxing Night’s disaster would not readily disappear”.<sup>7</sup>

The difficulties about securing suitable attractions increased, and while there were some successes and some notable visitors, including Henry Irving and Barry Sullivan, both of whom had

6. G.R. Powell and his father were both theatre critics. With his brother F. Gover Powell, he wrote quite successful plays. He too was a member of the Bristol Arts Club. His testimony is therefore that of a friend as well as critic.

7. G. Rennie Powell, *The Bristol Stage*, Bristol, 1919, p. 88.

strong local connections, and Madame Ristori and Maria Roze who had none, the stock company system was dying. An early attempt in 1873 at a season of opera by a company led by Carl Rosa, *before* the formation of his famous company, did not prove successful. Acting rights of new London successes were no longer released. Special London companies were now being formed to tour the country. As Powell observed, "Provincial managements were compelled to take their programmes very much as the house keeper acquires the family milk i.e. when offering in the district . . . . Had Mr. J.H. Chute been moved by less of the family instinct of *esprit de corps*, consulted his own feelings of personal dignity and treated the affair purely as a commercial rather than artistic situation, some three or four seasons earlier (that is about 1874) must have found Bristol following in the wake of the more Northern cities where commerce prevailed".<sup>8</sup>

When James Henry Chute died within a few months of his wife in 1878 he left his sons two theatres, the old Theatre Royal in King Street and the New Theatre Royal in Park Row, a stock company, the problem of product and a strong legacy of his own views on theatre. The nature of theatrical activity is such (attractions are booked for about a year ahead) that George Macready Chute, third son of James Henry, and his fifth son, James Macready Chute, were unable to set their own particular mark on the programmes offered for some time. Their early changes were organisational and structural. In October 1878 they began offering balcony/circle seats for the first time. This was a beginning of a social change which happened in theatres everywhere. The old cheap preserves of the poorer classes — the pit and the balcony — were invaded by higher-priced seats and upper class patrons. The poorer classes, in the end, were confined to the gallery. In 1881 the brothers Chute also provided new refreshment rooms and brought the conduct of refreshments under the theatre's own aegis for the first time. Previously this had been contracted out. At the opening of the theatre, for example, the refreshments had been provided by Mrs. Caldicott of Caldicott's Hotel, St. Augustines Parade.

Pantomime excursion trains were organised which effectively widened the theatre's audience. The "early doors"<sup>9</sup> system was

8. *ibid.*, p. 115.

9. Patrons queued for admission at the prices advertised. On the "early doors" principle, those willing to pay a modest supplement could "jump

introduced which meant that the audience no longer had to stand in the rain and the chances of another disaster were reduced. The old custom of offering introductory plays to pantomime performances was abandoned and the old stock company was disbanded. The brothers had therefore to recruit a company specially for their first joint benefit (a performance in which the box office went to the beneficiary personally). Benefit performances were an old custom in the theatre and were held annually for the manager in Bristol.<sup>10</sup>

In 1886 the brothers Chute re-laid the stage and updated its fixtures, but perhaps the most important change had come two years earlier when they changed the name of the theatre. The theatre built by J.H. Chute had been called the New Theatre Royal. This had two disadvantages. First it led to a degree of confusion between the new theatre and the old house in King Street. Secondly, it was preventing the new theatre from establishing what would now be called "its own image". From August 1884 the Park Row house was called "The Prince's".

If the name of New Theatre Royal had been blighted by the Boxing Night tragedy, the new Prince's had a blessing from another extraneous incident. On the concluding night of the 1883/84 pantomime *Cinderella*, when the audience included the Mayor, a theatre attendant had occasion to eject a man. The Chute brothers were determined to maintain order in their theatre and the attendant had been appointed for that task. He was not, however, supposed to eject patrons forcibly; that was a job for the police. When the disgruntled patron took an action at the Assizes he therefore won his case and was awarded £30. Although they lost the case in the courts, the event worked in the Chutes' favour. On 27 April the brothers received £100 in cash contributed by nearly 200 subscribers "in appreciation of the efforts of Messrs. G.M. and J.M. Chute to enforce order in the New Theatre Royal". The Mayor was among those who

the queue" and be admitted first. A certain lamp post in Park Row was used as a marker. Experienced patrons knew that if the queue extended beyond this lamp post they would not gain admission. They could then decide to pay the supplement or return on another night. For this reason, and on wet evenings, the "early doors" was a popular reform.

10. They are now confined to special charity galas in the theatre, but interestingly personal benefits remain a feature of professional cricket and association football.



contributed. There was another indication of the new respectability of the theatre when a few weeks earlier the Duke and Duchess of Beaufort had attended a performance of *Fedora*. The brothers now gave up the lease of the old theatre in King Street; from 1884 the Prince's Theatre had no association with the Theatre Royal ("the old Gaff"),<sup>11</sup> and its low social milieu. The Prince's was free to build its own reputation and its own audience.

The problem as always was product. In this respect the 1880's was an easier time for the provincial theatre relying largely on touring plays than the 1870's had been. J.H. Chute's contacts, many of them from old stock company days, were maintained, and the Park Row theatre had visits from Hollingshead's Gaiety star Kate Vaughn and J.L. Toole the great comic actor<sup>12</sup> who was as much a family friend as a touring manager. Carl Rosa and his opera company offered a short annual season; Dion Boucicault *père*, certainly the most famous of nineteenth century actor-playwrights, made a brief appearance; and Bristol had a chance to see again Genevieve Ward, the opera singer turned actress. There were other newer attractions. The D'Oyly Carte company made its first visit with *H.M.S. Pinafore*. A later visit (5 December 1881) with *The Pirates of Penzance* led to the introduction for the first time of matinees. According to Powell, Bristol was so favoured by D'Oyly Carte that it saw *Patience* within a month of its composition. Bristol also seems to have seen other D'Oyly Carte Gilbert and Sullivan productions quite soon after the London opening.

Another interesting feature of Prince's programmes under the joint managership of the brothers is the number of up-and-coming stars who appeared — future London actor managers like Charles Wyndham and George Alexander. The great Henry Irving himself appeared with Ellen Terry and the Lyceum company. On this occasion it was the support of his full London company that was significant. He had appeared earlier under Bateman management in J.H. Chute's time, supported by the stock company, in his London success *Charles I*. There were other great names — Barry Sullivan, E.A. Sothorn who played Dundreary — famous for his whiskers, Edmund Tearle in Shakespeare and R.L. Courtneidge. When the Carl Rosa

11. Gaff: music hall, pejr. theatre.

12. Another member of the Bristol Arts Club.

Company came, the leading singer was Maria Roze. Her name is now known only to music specialists. She made her Bristol debut in 1873, but in the 1880's she was probably the leading soprano of the time, and certainly something of a favourite with Queen Victoria.

In a somewhat racier vein Prince's patrons had the opportunity to see Lillie Langtry's legs (in W.G. Wills *A Young Tramp*). She dressed as a boy and wore shorts and was somewhat concerned about the reception she might receive. She need not have worried; Bristol loved her.

One of the noticeable improvements in the brothers' programmes was the growing number of weeks devoted to opera. Apart from Carl Rosa the Prince's welcomed the Favart Opera, Mapelson's Italian Opera, and a series of operas by combinations known simply by the names of their leading players. The operas performed were of varying quality and included many which no longer figure in the repertoire. Of these perhaps Balfe's *Bohemian Girl* and Wallace's *Maritana* are now the best known, but there are others which are now forgotten — perhaps mercifully — including Victor Masse's *Galatea*, Boito's *Mefistofele*, Planquette's *Nell Gwynne*, Ambroise Thomas' *Mignon*, Boieldieu's *La Dame Blanche*, Hérold's *Zampa*, and Corder's *Nordissa*. Though much of this was old, very old, some, like Cellier's *The Carp* was new work and one must applaud the courage of Carl Rosa, the other opera companies and the Prince's management for not always playing safe.

Nowhere was the change from their father's regime seen more clearly than in the pantomimes. The brothers' first pantomime was *Sinbad*. The company engaged, with the exception of two old local stars, Charles Arnold and William Fosbrooke, was entirely new and included Nelly Bouverie and Grace Huntley, who were to become local favourites. There was a growing trend in the Chute brothers pantomime to make the product more home grown. This was particularly reflected in the scenic and costume designs of Mark Barraud,<sup>13</sup> the work of Charles Arnold as stage

13. Mark Barraud was an extremely able theatrical designer. Another member of the Bristol Arts Club, he was reknowned for his good humour and practical jokes which included sending visitors to catch trout at Fishponds and burning down the musical director's conservatory. His early death from heart trouble was a great shock but it conferred on him a curious immortality. Everywhere he went he was accompanied by his dog

manager and the sets of Harry Owen, the carpenter.

Money was sometimes spent lavishly<sup>14</sup> but audiences now exceeded one hundred thousand for the pantomimes. Since the total population of Bristol at that time was only a little over two hundred thousand this was a tribute to the organisational skills of the Chutes and an indication of the regional importance of their theatre.

The Chutes also attempted home grown new work in "straight drama". They produced several plays by "*the Magpie*" critic G. Rennie Powell under his nom-de-plume Rennie Palgrave. Of these *Cast Adrift* and *The Faithful Heart* appear to have been the most successful — the Bristol productions transferred to London and *The Faithful Heart* had over 1000 performances. The brothers also found an opportunity to produce *Formosa*, Dion Boucicault's play of illicit passion which their father had scornfully rejected with the comment, "No. No. There is some bread that is too dirty to eat".

They were not thereby rejecting the family legacy. On the contrary, when James M. Chute came forward to address the audience on the occasion of his benefit in July 1887, he quite specifically acknowledged the Macready tradition. In the last fifty years, he told his audience, the drama had made very remarkable and very encouraging strides. Ancient prejudices had been broken down, traditional misconceptions had been removed and the stage now wielded a wider and greater influence than ever. The general public opinion had been won over to the side of the acted drama which afforded healthful recreation and intellectual enjoyment to all classes. "In addressing a Bristol audience on this subject," he continued, "I may be allowed to remind you that it was Macready who began the gradual elevation of the stage, and his brilliant career drew attention to the actor's calling as one entitled to every respect and consideration. Finally, allow me to assure you that the ambition of the descendants of Macready<sup>15</sup> has been, and will be, to continue in the path he has marked out

Nipper. When he died, his brother who was also a talented painter, produced a study of Nipper listening to Mark Barraud's voice recorded on a cylinder. The painting *His Master's Voice* with a disc instead of the cylinder became the trade mark of the famous recording company.

14. An octave of bells for the 1882/83 pantomime cost £450, a very considerable sum in those days.

15. The Chutes were not descendants of the great Macready but of his half-sister. J.M. was concerned here with spiritual matters.

for all who come after him. It will always be our endeavour to keep Bristol in the forefront of what is newest and best in dramatic art and to secure to the Prince's the reputation of being one of the most popular and — this is very important — the best supported theatres in the United Kingdom."

This neat mixture of family tradition, sentiment, local patriotism, artistic challenge and commercial interest had characterized the brothers' stewardship, but this was the last occasion on which they were to appear together to acknowledge the plaudits of their friends and their audience. In August 1887 George M. Chute caught a cold which developed, despite a stay in Switzerland, into serious lung trouble. In May 1888 he left for a long sea voyage to visit his elder brother, Dr. Henry Chute, at King Williamstown in South Africa. At first, under the care of his brother, who had followed his mother's brother's example and entered the medical rather than the theatrical profession, he appeared to be recovering. He was sent up country to Aliwal North, but suffered a relapse and died from a severe haemorrhage on 13 August, just thirteen months after he had appeared robust and healthy at his brother's side on the stage of the Prince's.

George Macready Chute was born in the Bath Assembly Rooms when J.H. Chute had the lease there. He originally intended to enter the Merchant Navy but gave up after four years to assist his father in the theatre. He was first assistant stage manager (he broke a leg testing a trap for *Amy Robsart*) and then treasurer of the theatre. Like all the Chutes he delighted in acting and was said to be particularly effective in comedy. His wife, Adelaide Chippendale, was also a talented actress, the daughter of an actor. They had two children, one born after he became ill.

The joint managership of the brothers had lasted almost ten years. The *Bristol Mercury* commented in an obituary on 14 August 1888: "the sons have worthily upheld the reputation of their name by the enterprise which they displayed, the very high character which they have maintained for their theatre, the care and liberality with which they have mounted every production on their stage, and by the esteem they have won from all whom they employed . . ."

George Chute's main responsibility had been the stage, which he was said to have directed with great energy and skill in a manner which old actors said closely resembled his father. With the death of George the whole care, direction and management

of the Prince's fell upon James.

James Macready Chute was certainly equal to the task. He was perhaps the most remarkable man to grace the world of Bristol theatre. Born in Bath, his original intention was to become a civil engineer in India. He passed the necessary examination successfully but failed the medical tests. He therefore spent some years working with the Bristol and Exeter Railway. He took up theatre work on the death of his father but had some further health problems which required a prolonged trip to the Mediterranean to effect a recovery. In 1886 he married one of the most beautiful and lively girls in Bristol, Miss Abigail Philomena Henessy, the second daughter of Mr. Joseph Henessy of Richmond Terrace, Clifton, a prominent Bristol Liberal and businessman in the cattle trade. The Henessys were Irish and Roman Catholic and that fact was to have a vital effect later on the Prince's Theatre. James M. Chute himself was an Anglican and although the marriage took place at the Pro-Cathedral, Chute continued to worship at St. Mary's, Tyndall Park, or St. Paul's Church in Clifton, until his death. The marriage brought him not only a loving wife who bore him a son, Desmond, named after various Henessys and his paternal grandmother the actress Sarah Desmond, second wife of Macready *père*, but a companion who was a considerable help in his life in the theatre.

The new Mrs. Macready showed herself to be literally at home in the Prince's. Taking up an idea which the brothers had used a little earlier for their sisters, on 22 April 1890 she transferred her "at home" from the Chute house, Abbeymeade in Tyndall's Park, to the stage of the theatre. Over one hundred guests came to admire the splendid drawing room the stage staff had created. The musical director of the Prince's, George Chapman, and a group from the theatre orchestra provided the music. Miss Christine Chute contributed a concerto and Miss Clara Butt was among the guests who sang.

Mrs. Chute kept up an animated correspondence with Clara Butt after her marriage and after she had become internationally famous. In a letter dated 26 June 1897 Dame Clara agreed to sing at the Prince's on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria. After asking for a rehearsal if possible, and declaring she would sing the same version of *God Save the Queen* that she sang at the opening of Her Majesty's Theatre, she concluded "Give my love to the baby!! Bless it!!". Mrs. Chute evidently wrote warmly when Clara had her baby.<sup>16</sup>



As late as 1924 she was sending Christmas greetings to Mrs. Chute signed “With love, Clara Butt Rumford”,<sup>17</sup> evidence of a warm and continuing friendship. This good relationship was not confined to Clara Butt. Ellen Terry wrote to Mrs. Chute on 9 September 1898 in obviously intimate, friendly and affectionate terms: “*Do* tell me of a nice hotel at Clifton (NOT the Clifton Down Hotel where H.I. stays). What is that “Hydro” Hotel like I wonder? Anyhow I want a QUIET place, for if I don’t sleep, I Can’t act. Do send me a wire and tell me the name of some place you know pretty well. I tried lodgings once — on Sion Hill. The beds were *quite remarkable* — I hope to find you all well and jolly on the 19th. We are playing in the East End of London — no water!! but I’ll drink and get washed before I come to my dear blessed Bristol”.<sup>18</sup>

There are similar warm letters from other great stars such as Maria Roze Mapleson, inviting Mrs. Chute to call on them. Wilson Barrett, writing to her husband about a forthcoming engagement, asked Chute to ask his wife “to come to see me during the week”. Violet Bourchier wrote to Mrs. Chute saying she was sorry to leave Bristol: “I wish I could have seen more of you. What a first rate little call boy you have just now. He is a regular little sheep dog”. There are warm letters, too, from Seymour Hicks and his wife Ellaline Terriss. Frank Benson after he received his knighthood thanked her for her congratulations and added: “The name of Chute takes us back to the starting part of our career. It also recalls much kindness received from you and your late husband”.<sup>19</sup>

James Macready Chute and his wife evidently worked hard to see that artists were happy in Bristol. They were greeted with flowers in the dressing room and a note of welcome. Visiting companies remarked on the cleanliness of the theatre, which contrasted sharply with the rather dirty provincial theatres run by the syndicates.<sup>20</sup>

The difference between the Prince’s and many other provincial theatres of the time was that in ownership, management and

16. Letter from Colonel Rumford, undated, in the personal theatre collection of Mr Adrian Varcoe.

17. *ibid.*

18. *ibid.*

19. All letters referred to here are in the Varcoe Collection.

20. Letter undated from Lena Ashwell in the Varcoe Collection.

atmosphere, the Bristol theatre did not belong to a syndicate. It was a family theatre. It was owned by a family and the Chutes deliberately created a family atmosphere. All who worked in the Prince's came to be more family retainers than employees. James Sheeny, the box keeper, for example, had served the Chutes and old Mrs Macready for 57 years. Mrs. Shapcott kept the theatre clean for over 50 years from October 1852. When she retired in 1904 she was succeeded by her daughter. George Chapman, the musical director, owed his appointment by old James Henry in 1864 to his romance with Miss Mandlebert, a popular singer, whom James Henry wanted to have in the stock company. Chapman stayed on until his death in 1902 when he was succeeded by his son. His daughter Nellie married Chute's assistant manager F.S. Green.

Chute gave annual dinners for his staff,<sup>21</sup> normally down the road from the theatre at the King David Hotel, or up the road at the Drill Hall restaurant. When the 25th anniversary of his entry into management (24 August 1903) came around, the entire staff of the Prince's contributed to the silver gifts presented to him by the stage carpenter, Harry Owen, who joined the Chutes in 1860. His silver wedding anniversary and the birth of his son, Desmond, were also occasions marked by gifts and encomiums from his staff. Chute was not only manager; he was a Victorian/Edwardian *pater familias*, the leader of a business enterprise that was also a family circle.

In professional circles he became increasingly prominent. He was Secretary of the Provincial Managers' Association and served as secretary for a number of major benefits and testimonials. He made important contributions to matters of controversy in the theatre world of his time. For example, he favoured the creation of a theatrical Trade Union but hoped it would not be confined to actors. He acknowledged the shortcomings of his fellow managers and of a system of employment which often left whole companies stranded in, say, Glasgow, when their base was in London. He became a director of the Prince of Wales Theatre in Birmingham and of the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin. The latter appointment was at the invitation of Michael Gunn who was in failing health. Gunn, apart from his local significance in Dublin, which was considerable, played a crucial role in the careers of

21. A custom started under the brothers' management.

both D'Oyly Carte and George Edwardes. The invitation to become involved in the running of the Gaiety, Dublin, is not only a measure of Gunn's assessment of Chute's professional abilities but also an indication of a friendship which may be the reason why the Prince's appeared to be favoured by Edwardes and D'Oyly Carte. Chute evidently was one of the leading managers of his time.

In assessing today Chute's achievement as sole manager of the Prince's it has to be borne in mind that the criteria by which "good theatre" is judged have changed. Today we have a playwrights' or a directors' theatre. Chute's age was not much interested in playwrights and still less in directors. The late Victorian and Edwardian age was the era of the actor, the manager and the actor/manager. The importance of the Prince's under Chute can therefore be determined not by seeking in the Prince's programmes the names of Ibsen, Shaw, Poel, Granville-Barker, and others who now seem to us significant, but by studying the lists of those who graced its stage. For the people of the time it was *who* appeared on the stage, not what they said or did there which was significant.

By this criterion Chute's record was impressive. Bristolians had the opportunity to see J.L. Toole, Henry Irving, Gordon Craig (not much of an actor but welcomed as Ellen Terry's son), Beerbohm Tree (with the company that opened Her Majesty's just before the London opening), John Hare, George Alexander, Oscar Asche, Lawrence Irving, Robert Courtneidge, Wilson Barrett, Mr. and Mrs. Kendal, Gerald du Maurier, Forbes Robertson, Fred Terry, Matheson Long, Arthur Bouchier, Martin Harvey, Seymour Hicks, and Hayden Coffin. Among the female stars were numbered Ellen Terry, Irene and Violet Vanbrugh, Nina Boucicault, Ada Reeve, Connie Ediss, Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Sarah Bernhardt, Julia Neilson Terry, Lillie Langtry, Pavlova, Ellaline Terriss, Lily Elsie, Marie Studholme, Gabrielle Ray, Zena and Phyllis Dare. There is virtually no major figure who did not appear. Quite simply, the Prince's presented the best.

The plays they appeared in were important in the way that certain films and television programmes (like *Cathy come Home*) now are — irrespective of any intrinsic merit they may have as art, they were famous for being famous. The Prince's audience saw all the famous plays. They saw Irving in all his great roles — indeed the Prince's had the honour of staging the première of *A*

*Story of Waterloo* in which Irving played old Brewster, considered to be among his finest portrayals. They saw *The Sign of the Cross*, *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, *The Only Way*,<sup>22</sup> and *The Importance of being Ernest* (with George Alexander), Hawtrey's *Private Secretary* (again and again). They saw many plays by Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones who did have reputations as playwrights. They also saw Shaw — *Arms and the Man*, *Man and Superman* and *The Devil's Disciple*. They saw productions by Lillah MacCarthy, Granville-Barker and Vedrenne. Chute was not afraid of "problem plays", plays that dealt with social issues. He presented *Drink* (with Charles Warren as the drunken Coupeau) which is not now thought to be a particularly penetrating study of alcoholism. But he had moral standards which he upheld. Powell records that Chute once told George Alexander that he hoped that he would bring no more plays about illicit passion to Bristol and that Alexander respected his views.

Even if they did not wish to see or to discuss adultery, Chute and his audiences did have an eye for a pretty girl. Chute managed to obtain for his theatre early opportunities to see the best of the new theatrical form invented by George Edwardes — musical comedy. The shows normally originated at the Gaiety or Daly's, both controlled by Edwardes, but other London theatres like the Adelphi also developed successful examples of the genre. They were remarkable for the excellence of the music, the brilliance of the sets and costumes, the beauty of the ladies and the sameness of the titles — they all seemed to include the word "girl" or some synonym for it. Their stars won as many hearts (and sold as many picture postcards of themselves) in Bristol as in London.

Chute also managed to obtain the best of other forms of theatre. Augustus Harris sent his Burlesque company and Drury Lane spectacles — plays like *The Whip* which required *inter alia* train and ship wrecks, and horse races with live horses. If these marvels of stage-craft appealed to the sensational taste, Chute also could claim to provide more cultural delights. He continued to attract good opera combinations like the Covent

22. Bristol had to wait to see Martin Harvey in his greatest role as Sydney Carton. The part was first played here by William Haviland. Haviland came from Bristol. He had changed his name from Irwin to avoid confusion with Irving, who of course had changed his name from Broadribb.

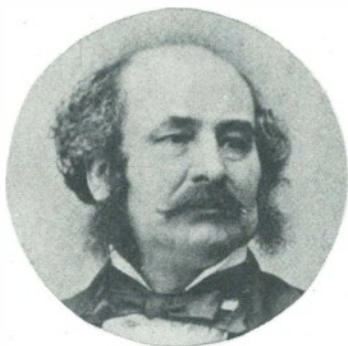
Garden Italian Opera Company, The Moody Manners Company and the fledgling Beecham Opera, led by the irascible Thomas. Undoubtedly the highlights of the operatic year were the annual visits of the Savoy and Carl Rosa companies. The Carl Rosa Company's founder was dead but it continued to present much that is either not present or is rare in today's repertoire — operas like *L'Étoile du Nord* (Meyerbeer), *Romeo and Juliet* (Gounod), *Cinque Mars* (Gounod), *The Talisman* (Balfe) and *André Chenier* (Giordano). It is important to remember, too, that when Carl Rosa first presented works commonplace to us now, such as *Carmen* and *La Bohème*, they were not familiar and were by no means certain of success.

Chute left success as little to chance as possible. He was determined that the Prince's should be good on stage and off. In 1902 he closed the theatre for extensive renovations. He had gradually introduced modern equipment, such as electric lighting backstage, but he was still haunted by the Boxing Night disaster. He was concerned to have better exits. Since this would necessitate closing the theatre, he decided to take the opportunity to renovate the front of curtain part of the house entirely. The arrangements were in the hands of Frank Matcham,<sup>23</sup> like Phipps, a leading theatre architect of his day. New doors were provided, the exterior was scraped to remove the grime, and four classical statues representing Tragedy, Comedy, Music and Dance adorned the top of the building.<sup>24</sup> A handsome glass and iron shelter was affixed to the front of the building which gleamed white instead of its habitual grey. Electric lighting was supplied throughout the house; new fauteuils (stall seats) further invaded the old pit space and the floors were sloped to give better sight lines, the boxes were re-modelled and new circulation space — foyers, smoking rooms, lounges — was provided. The decoration throughout the interior was a chaste scheme of cream and gold, and the newly upholstered seats were of a dark red colour. Significantly, in the new foyer, at the foot of the staircase leading to the dress circle, there was a monument in marble to the great Macready. The *Era* commented on 16 August, 1902: "In an almost incredibly short space of time the theatre has been modernised so that it is second to none in the provinces, and it

23. Matcham had already been employed on a partial refit as early as 1889, and there was some further work done in 1907.

24. Removed as unsafe July 1915.

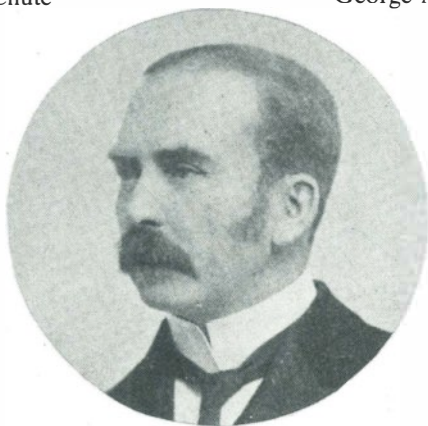




J. H. Chute



George M. Chute



James M. Chute



Abigail Chute

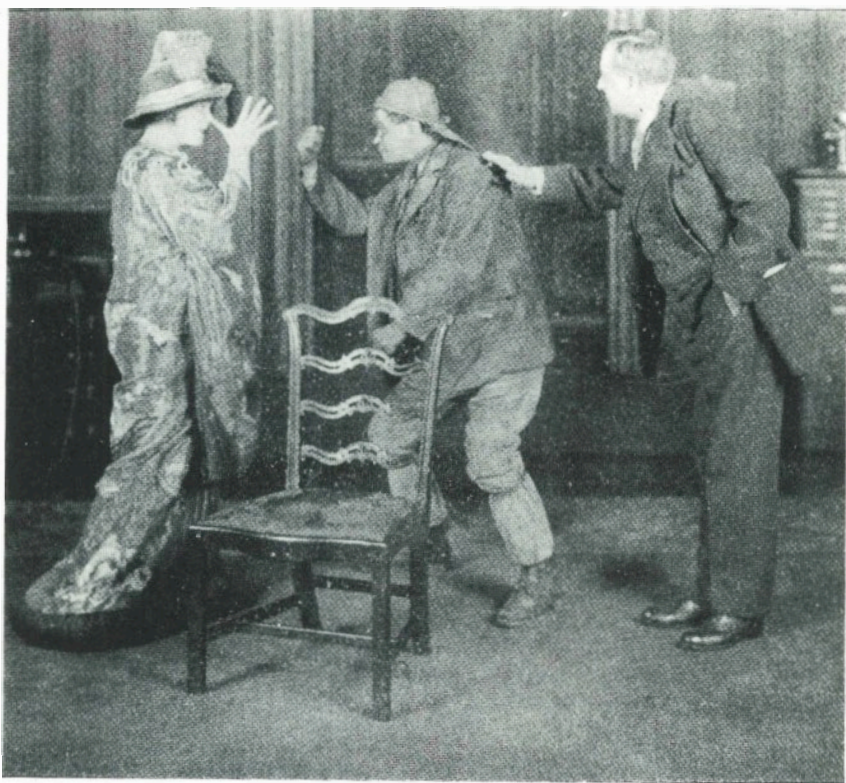


Rev. Desmond M. Chute



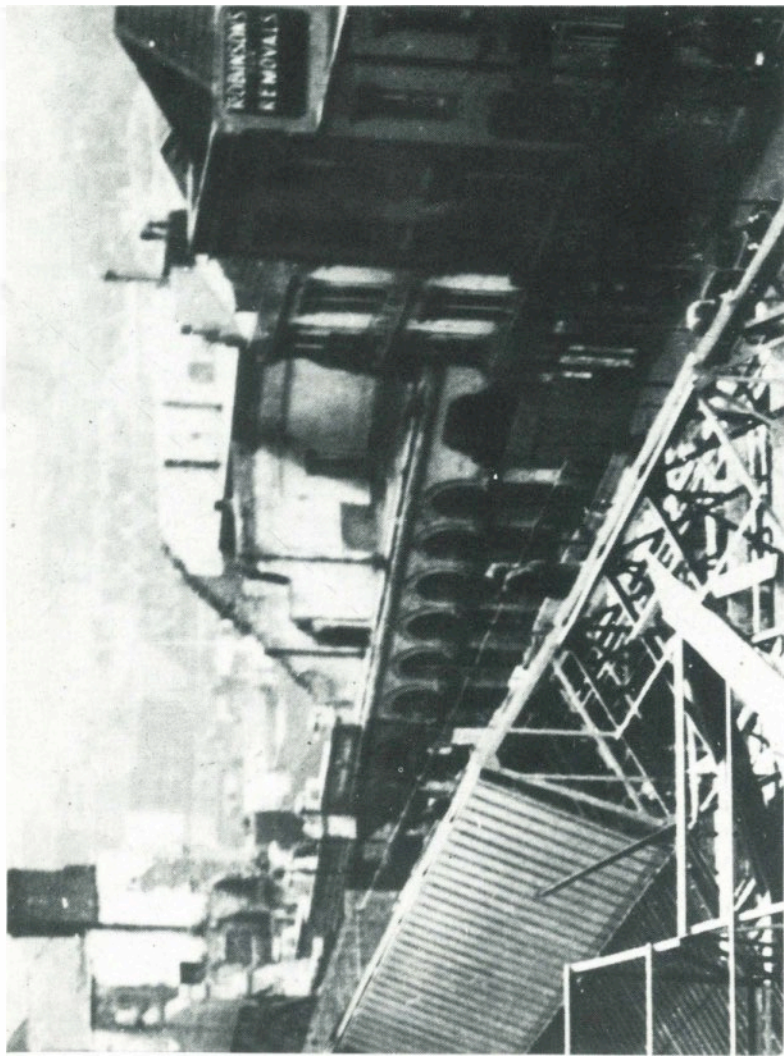
The exterior of the Prince's after the Matcham renovations. The figures on the roof line were later removed.

*From a Prince's Theatre programme*



An unusual piece of direction by Shaw. Dorothy Dix defies her dustman father.  
*From a Prince's Theatre programme, 1914*





After the fire, The Prince's lies derelict as the new University Veterinary School (foreground) rises on the site of the Bristol Coliseum.

*Photo: Ralph Brennell*

can compare most favourably with the best examples of the London houses". The seating capacity had been reduced to 1,769 (stalls 57, dress circle 103, balcony 122, fauteils 137, upper circle and amphitheatre 300, pit 518, gallery 500, private boxes 32). It may be worth noting that well over half the accommodation provided was designed for the lower prices and the lower classes.

To open the transformed theatre Chute had the Savoy production of Edward German and Basil Hood's *Merrie England*. The Savoy production had opened very successfully in London on 2 April but the Savoy too had had to close for structural alterations soon after *Merrie England* started its successful run. Chute shrewdly invited the company to present the opera in Bristol while its own theatre was closed. Thus Bristol saw *Merrie England* on its first visit outside London; it proved to be an appropriate show for it not only coincided with the opening of the new Matcham interior but Chute was able to time his pre-opening reception for Coronation Day 1902.

*Merrie England* was an enormous success for the Prince's, but the cornerstone of Chute's enterprise, artistically and financially, was not a London import — it was his own locally produced pantomime. In Victorian and Edwardian times and even later, as Novello and Coward discovered, pantomimes were such good, reliable box office that no theatre manager would brook much interference with them. Chute kept his pantomimes firmly under his control. Planning began in August each year and work on sets and costumes shortly after. Casting was a continuous process. Every year Chute travelled widely throughout the country seeing around thirty other pantomimes in search of talent and ideas. He recruited good writers like J. Hickory Wood and seemed to have a knack for picking future stars of musical comedy at an early stage of their careers. Among principal boys Ada Reeve, Florence Lloyd and Daisy Wood, the latter both sisters of the famous Marie Lloyd, were particular favourites. Among the dames the comedian Wilkie Bard was pre-eminent. The ballet was rehearsed three weeks before the opening night and the rest of the cast for two weeks. If the show proved to be too long when it opened at Christmas it was cut. By the end of the run, usually at the beginning of March, all Bristol knew its songs and catch-phrases.

On the last night the audience which had queued for admission sometimes for up to five hours joined in the songs whether the cast were willing or not. As particularly beautiful or ingenious scenes



appeared, Chute or his designer had to take a call to receive the audience's appreciation. Pennies were thrown onto the stage for the pantomime children, dangerous practice for the old pennies were large and heavy. The comedians' catch phrases were anticipated. On one occasion Wilkie Bard had a phrase "the boy's right!" Throughout a tumultuous evening he went one better than the audience every time they howled out his catch line. He held up his hand. "The infant is correct", he said. And later, "*Le garçon a raison*". It says much for the Edwardians' love of simple word play that this riotous contest of synonyms brought resounding cheers. At the end of the evening there were large bouquets for the female stars and, on one occasion, a beautifully presented cauliflower for the Dame. Chute had to make a speech during which, if he could make himself heard, he announced the programme for the rest of the season and, most eagerly awaited of all, the title and stars of the next year's pantomime. Like the last night of the Promenade concerts in London today, the last night of the Prince's Pantomime passed beyond performance into a celebration in which music, joy, youth and common identity mixed together in a rite of confident affirmation.

This fervour is reflected in the locally published accounts of the pantomimes and with only these reports it would be difficult to assess how good the Prince's pantomimes really were. Fortunately we have an impartial witness whose testimony and judgement must weigh heavily. Bernard Shaw saw the 1899 production *Aladdin*. In *The World* later, he wrote, "I found myself one evening in Bristol with nothing better to do than to see whether pantomime is really moribund. I am bound to say that it seems to me as lively as it was twenty-five years ago. The fairy queen,<sup>25</sup> singing *In Old Madrid* with reckless irrelevance at the entrance of the cave where Aladdin found the lamp, was listened to with deep respect as an exponent of the higher singing; and in the cave itself, *The Bogie Man*, in about fifty verses, took immensely.<sup>26</sup> A street scene at night, with chinese lanterns and a willow pattern landscape, were stage pictures with just the right artistic quality for the occasion; and the absurdity of the whole affair on the dramatic side was amusing enough from our indulgent holiday point of view. There were no processions presenting one silly

25. Florrie Parfrey.

26. Florrie Parfrey sang *In Old Madrid*, Grace Huntley *The Bogie Man*.

idea over and over again in different coloured tights, until a thousand pounds had been wasted in boring the audience to distraction. And — though here I hardly expect to be believed — there was not a single child under ten on the stage. I told Mr. Macready Chute, the manager, that he should come to London to learn from our famous stage managers here how to spend ten times as much money on a pantomime for one tenth of the artistic return. I bade him, if he thirsted for metropolitan fame, to take for his triple motto, 'Expenditure, Inanity, Vulgarity', and that soon no spectacular piece would be deemed complete without him. With these three precepts I left him, assuring him that I felt more than ever what a privilege it was to live in a convenient arts centre like London, where the nearest pantomime is at Bristol and the nearest opera at Bayreuth".

In pantomime, as in his other product, Chute gave Bristolians the best. And they responded. Charity events in aid of the Bristol Royal Infirmary funds produced large sums. When the size of ladies hats was a problem, Chute experienced none of the acrimony George Alexander had in London when he requested ladies to remove them in the theatre. A memorandum from Chute in the programme produced the desired result with no fuss.<sup>27</sup> However, as King Edward's reign drew to a close, Chute became ill. An operation became necessary and seemed at first to be successful. He rallied for a time, but on 15 February 1912 he died.

He was buried at Arno's Vale beside his parents. Canon Haigh's funeral sermon drew analogies with theatrical benefit nights. And indeed the large crowds at the church and at the cemetery and lining the funeral procession route had come to say thank you to the man who had given them so much. But they were there too for another reason. Although the shape of things and theatres yet to come was hidden from them, there was in the passing of James Macready Chute a very real sense of the end of an era, a feeling that nothing would ever be the same again.

Exactly a year after the death of James Macready Chute the Prince's Theatre became a limited company. The first chairman

27. Programme Note: Irving & Terry 1898 "Mr. Chute suggests that it would give very great satisfaction to visitors to the Theatre if LADIES would KINDLY REMOVE their HATS during the progress of the performance, so that those behind may obtain a better view of the stage." See also *Times and Mirror*, 12 March 1902.

was George, later Sir George, Davies, but the artistic control of the theatre and its day-to-day running were in the hands of Mrs. Chute and John Hart who had assisted her husband during the two years of illness which preceded his death. F.S. Green, the brother in law of the musical director George R. Chapman, left for London and was replaced as Treasurer by J. Ellis Miller. Miller was the grandson of a Redcliffe man and made his first contact with the Prince's in 1882 when he visited Bristol as director of Pinero's comedy *The Squire*, starring Rose Le Clercq. The seventeen-year-old heir apparent to the theatre, Desmond, was soon to leave Downside to study at the Slade. His cousin, George, son of Stephen Macready Chute<sup>28</sup>, the Prince's publicity man, joined the company as assistant manager. This team was to carry on the work of the Prince's for more than a decade.

At first it seemed that nothing had changed. In the year or so after her husband's death, Mrs. Chute presented Seymour Hicks and Ellaline Terriss in the musical *Broadway Jones*, Fred Terry in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, George Alexander in *Bella Donna* and Martin Harvey in Reinhardt's production of *Hamlet*. George Edwardes sent companies with *The Dancing Mistress*, *The Dollar Princess*, Lehar's *Gipsy Love* and the farewell tour of the *Merry Widow*. Granville-Barker and Lillah MacCarthy's company presented Arnold Bennett's *Great Adventurer*, with Athene Seyler and Shiel Barry in the cast, and Vedrenne and Eadie presented *Milestones* by Bennett and Knoblauch. Bristol audiences saw Knoblauch's play *Kismet*, which forty years on was to become a hit musical with music by Borodin. Baffled audiences of children came to see Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. By any contemporary standards this was an excellent programme for the provinces.

The business side of the theatre was well organised too. Tickets could be booked in Weston, Bath and Swindon. Theatre programmes carried timetables not only for the new electric trams and charabancs "which pass the theatre every four minutes" but also trains for Keynsham, Trowbridge, Chippenham, Hereford, Newport and Cardiff (Great Western Railway) and Warmley Yate, Stonehouse and Gloucester (Midland). Prices were reasonable. The minimum male wage in Bristol in 1914 was around £1 10s (£1.50p) a week; skilled men received more. The most expensive seats were the orchestra stalls and dress circle at 4/-

28. Stephen M. Chute had died aged 47 on 14 November 1899. His wife was a Miss Goodier, a member of the old Theatre Royal stock company.

(20p) and the cheapest, the gallery, was 6d (2½p). Cigarettes were sold at 2½d (1p) for ten and tobacco was 5d (about 2p) an ounce. A box at the Prince's was the same price (£2 12s 6d) as a fine oak bed complete with mattress. The theatre bars offered home-brewed "Bristol United" beers and (the Irish influence) Jamesons Whiskey. And none of this was especially surprising, for the theatre the limited company took over was very much a going concern which had enjoyed a virtually unbroken sequence of improvement in physical equipment, architecture, and product for nearly half a century. But all this was brought to an end by the First World War.

Change was gradual. As it had done in the Boer War the Prince's did its bit for the war effort and the wounded with charity performances and special matinees.<sup>29</sup> The normal programme remained excellent. The Prince's welcomed established major stars like Lewis Waller and Oscar Asche and emerging major stars like Cicely Courtneidge and Jack Hulbert in *The Light Blues* and *The Cinema Star* both of which Jack wrote. Bristol saw Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies in *Tonight's the Night*, Jean Forbes-Robertson in *Peter Pan* and, a year after it opened in London, Shaw's *Pygmalion* directed by the author.<sup>30</sup> The Carl Rosa company now included Eva Turner as prima donna in *Don Giovanni* and *La Bohème*. The Prince's celebrated its Jubilee in 1917 with a special performance by Martin Harvey attended by many of the actors and actresses who had appeared over the years, including some who had appeared in the first production, *The Tempest*. But before the war ended there were signs of the wrath to come.

In 1917 George Alexander was to appear in *The Aristocrat* but he was prevented from doing so by diabetes which was shortly to end his life and his calls in Bristol had to be taken by the octogenarian Prince's favourite Genevieve Ward.<sup>31</sup> George

29. Mr Manny Epstein of the entertainments section of the Inquiry Committee, the body responsible for helping the wounded, organised . . . visits to and from the theatre. Mr. Epstein was Jewish and at this time the local Jewish community started to organise the Benefit nights for the Jewish poor which until the end of the theatre's history were to provide some of its most glittering social occasions.
30. The production photographs show some odd direction at times. See illustration.
31. Miss Ward acted as a "go-between" for the theatrical Macready Chutes and the lineal descendants of the great Macready. On the occasion of the

Edwardes, caught abroad by the outbreak of the war while at a German spa for the good of his health, came home to die. His son and heir D'arcy was killed in action. Herbert Beerbohm Tree died in 1917 and Charles Wyndham in 1919. Almost as important for the Prince's, G.R. Powell, playwright, critic and friend to the Chutes also died in 1919. While good actor/managers like Hicks and Du Maurier remained, with the deaths of Edwardes, Tree, Alexander and Wyndham it was clear that an era in the theatre, as sharply defined as the Age of Irving, was ending. The basis of the Prince's relationship with London managements had been as much friendship as business, old links established in years gone by. The new managements, even those of Wyndham's son Howard and his stepson Bronson Albery, were only interested in business, and new developments in entertainment were making provincial tours, especially to a theatre like the Prince's which was not on the No. 1 tour circuit, an increasingly financially hazardous affair.

If the slow ending of national tours was beginning to cause problems for the Prince's it was by no means the only difficulty it had to face. For considerably more than half its history the Prince's had had no rivals in respectable entertainment, but in 1912 new threats began to appear. The Bristol Coliseum opened to cater for the new craze of roller skating and, later, ice skating. The Bristol Hippodrome opened to offer good class variety. In 1923 the Little Theatre began to offer alternatives in straight theatre. From 1911, in the Prince's own programmes, Crichton's of Regent Street, Clifton, advertised the virtues of their gramophones with the added attraction that new consignments of records arrived daily. Opera, or ragtime, was now available in the home.

Worst still was the threat of the cinema. Before the war it was possible for reasonable men still to see the cinema not posing a threat to the theatre: Shaw, in a debate held at the Criterion in 1912, for example, thought its chief effect might be to improve the art of mime. But only a few years later Albert Chevalier included a "Note to picture goers in particular and the public in general" in the Prince's programme. He argued that the cinema "necessarily loses the greatest of all human gifts — the gift of speech". The cinema, he claimed, distorted and twisted stories. It

Jubilee she wrote to Mrs. Chute suggesting she send a copy of the souvenir programme to General Macready. (*Varcoe Collection.*)

demanded happy endings — even in Robertson's *Caste*, the play in which he was appearing. Looking at a film, he concluded, was "like looking through an illustrated edition of Shakespeare from which the reading matter had been removed".

Films, however, had advantages Chevalier ignored. They brought to every town every week without significant delay the great actors in their original roles. They were free from the poorer substitutes sometimes sent out on theatre tours; they had no long delays for scene changes; and they could do certain kinds of comedy and most kinds of spectacle better than the touring play. If films could not offer those rare nights of splendour when a great actor on tour suddenly transcended himself and his part, they also did not provide the frequent "off nights" when tired or ill actors hummed, coughed and bumbled their way to an uncertain final curtain. Above all, films were new, and novelty itself was an irresistible attraction. As soon as Al Jolson opened his mouth and actually sang in *The Jazz Singer* large provincial theatres seating close to two thousand people were in irretrievable difficulty, and large provincial cinemas seating two thousand people faced unrivalled prosperity.

Significantly, the Hippodrome was forced to experiment with films and even closed for a period. The Theatre Royal endured a half-life with a company offering old barn-storming melodramas before it closed. As Mrs. Chute's regime drew to an end the Prince's faced competition from six major "talking" cinemas: Empire; New Palace; Triangle Hall, Clifton; Whiteladies; Stoll (Bedminster Hippodrome), and the Premier, Gloucester Road. Others were soon to follow. For a few pennies Bristol audiences could see the original London cast in Ben Travers' farces on the screen: on stage at the Prince's they were offered the inferior substitutes used on the tour.

And while on stage Martin Harvey could claim with some justice that the mantle of Irving had fallen on him, on the screen the cloak and dagger of the swashbuckling Fred Terry, Bill Terriss and George Alexander had fallen on the broad and handsome shoulders of Douglas Fairbanks, Rudolph Valentino and Ramon Navarro.

Yet the product in the provincial theatres, at its best, remained good. Seymour Hicks, Matheson Lang, Martin Harvey, Frank Benson and others tried to hold their audiences and usually succeeded. Some of the younger talent, like Noel Coward in his own play *The Young Idea*, tried and failed. *The*



*Western Daily Press* gave it a good notice, but this good opinion, according to Coward, was not widely shared. The Carl Rosa and Savoy Opera companies, and the annual pantomime, still doggedly home-produced in the Chute tradition, retained their audiences, but for the rest of the theatre's year there were increasing numbers of revivals and many of the plays presented had long since passed beyond all reasonable hope of resuscitation.

Finally, the Prince's and the provincial theatre faced a threat from that lusty infant, the BBC, whose ideas of informing, educating and entertaining in a respectable way were not too far removed from the Chute traditions. It even began to usurp the field of musical comedy (7 March 1931) with *Rich Girl — Poor Girl* starring Phyllis Neilson-Terry.

Mrs. Chute and her co-manager tried other old remedies for their new problems. In 1931 they embarked on yet another refurbishing of the theatre. New lighting, new heating, a new act drop and imposing new frontage and some other structural improvements were carried out under the direction of A.E. Oaten. The changes were possibly needed: there is a tradition in the family of T.C.P. Hickson, who became manager and treasurer in 1925, that when he arrived he found the theatre dirty and the staff wearing their own clothes to work. He put them into uniform and brought back order and cleanliness.<sup>32</sup> But even Hickson's new broom was not effective and when Mrs. Chute died in October 1931 she left a theatre which faced an uncertain and doubtful future.

When the union of James Macready Chute and Abigail Philomena Henessy was blessed in September 1895 by the birth of a son, the event was thought to be significant. "The advent of the little stranger at Abbeymeade (Chute's home)," said the *Bristol Evening News* "is an event of dynastic importance". *The Evening News* and almost everyone else assumed that the succession was secured and that Desmond, in time, would follow his grandfather, uncle and father in managing the theatre. In the event Desmond Macready Chute proved to be both the fulfilment and the frustration of J.H. Chute's hopes. On the very first night of the Prince's, Jack Chute had asserted that the stage was the equal of the pulpit, the drama the peer of the other arts. So

32. Personal recollection by his son John Hickson.

evidently it seemed to Desmond: he saw no difference and no reason to prefer the theatre. Encouraged by his mother's strong Irish Catholic background and his Downside education, the heir apparent to the Prince's became first an artist (the friend of Eric Gill and Stanley Spencer) and secondly a priest of the Roman church. The only direct link now in the day-to-day management of the Prince's with the tradition of Macready and the Chutes was John Hart, and he was only to last another five years.

Whether it was the competition from other forms of entertainment, the economic recession, the scarcity of good plays, or the removal of Chute family influence cannot be determined, but there was a distinct falling off in quality in the early thirties in the Prince's standards, moral and theatrical.

Plays like Anthony Kimmin's *While Parents Sleep* offered a salacious appeal of precisely the kind often rejected by the Chutes<sup>33</sup> but perhaps did accurately present the reflex of the age and time. In 1935 the Prince's, to the horror of older patrons, was reduced to applying for a variety licence. The Prince's variety bills — one or two major stars like Harry Lauder aside — were not of outstanding quality. Some performers such as Elsie and Doris Water owed their fame and drawing power to the new media and were advertised as "BBC radio stars". There had been a healthy symbiotic relationship between the old Prince's and the London actor managers; there could be nothing but final disaster in this new parasitic relationship.

All that good management and efficiency could do was done by T.C.P. Hickson, especially after the death of Hart in 1936. Under Tommy Hickson's leadership and Fred Tricks' chairmanship matters improved a little. The style of the programmes and presentation became more up to date; the motto, which for many years had appeared above the proscenium, "Our true intent is all for your delight", now appeared on all covers. Pantomimes of excellent quality were "bought in" from Francis Laidler. Principal boys like Jean Colin and Dames like Clarkson Rose and Norman "Over the Garden Wall" Evans, spectacular acts like Kirby's Flying Ballet were well up to the old Chute standard but the serious problem of good all-year-round product remained. In the end the Prince's was saved not by its own efforts but by the military ambitions of the German dictator.

33. Mrs Chute had, daringly, offered a Restoration Comedy *The Way of the World*, with Nigel Playfair, in the twenties.

When Hitler marched into Poland the British Government responded by declaring war and closing the London theatres. Good plays were suddenly available in abundance again as managements sought out-of-town venues for their stars. Although not a No. 1 touring theatre belonging to the syndicates which controlled the provincial theatres, Bristol was too large a concentration of population to be neglected and the Prince's was a beneficiary of the revival of touring.

It received Leon Quartermaine and Marie Tempest in *Dear Octopus*, Robert Donat in *The Devil's Disciple*, Robb Wilton in *When we are Married*, Yvonne Arnaud and Alastair Sim in Bridie's *What they Say*, Bea Lillie and Vic Oliver in three one act plays by Noel Coward, and Ivor Novello appeared with Olive Gilbert. This was a galaxy of stars of the same magnitude as the golden days of James Macready Chute. In the Prince's final week of life it presented Jack Buchanan.<sup>34</sup> During his run the performance was interrupted by Bristol's 225th alert of the war. The hoardings advertising the next week's show *The Co-optimists* warned that there would be no performance on the Monday night. Never had a play bill spoken truer. On Sunday the German bombers came: on Monday night the Prince's was a still smouldering ruin.

Theatres have not infrequently been destroyed by fire and the destruction wrought by the air raid need not have been the end for the Prince's. But a combination of events worked against revival. First an auction in 1942 saved the old Theatre Royal from a future as a warehouse: the Royal's approximately 650 seats seemed a better economic prospect than the Prince's around 1500. Secondly, the London venues had reopened and tours were falling off again: the theatrical future seemed to lie with the repertory theatres.

The Prince's Manager, Tommy Hickson, transferred to the Royal and the first moves that led to the founding of the Bristol Old Vic began. The Chairman of the Prince's, Fred Tricks, whose associations went back over four decades, died. The task of managing the theatre's remaining affairs fell to his son, Dennis, and it was he who had to defend the site at a public enquiry against the City's claim to include the theatre in 771 acres of

34. Who had made his Bristol debut in a small role in Robert Courtneidge's production of *The Cinema Star*.

Central Bristol scheduled for redevelopment. That fight won, Dennis Tricks sold the site and goodwill to Stoll Theatres Corporation Limited — at long last the Prince's had fallen to the syndicates.

The Prince's Theatre Limited was wound up in November 1948. In April 1950 it seemed that Stoll might re-build when they acquired numbers 46, 50, 54 and 56 Park Street to solve the entrance problems which had bedevilled the theatre since the days of Phipps and J.H. Chute. By then a new theatre would have cost £500,000 and theatres elsewhere were being turned into bingo halls, shops and warehouses. In 1958 Stoll Theatres, who still owned the Hippodrome, no longer foresaw any need for a second Bristol theatre in Park Row and sold the site to Western Motors. When some old members of the staff gathered in 1967 to mark the centenary and share a few old memories, the bombed site was covered in bracken and buddleia and was attracting wild-life and birds. It has almost returned to the natural charms which characterised the site before the theatre was built. The remains of the theatre then passed from Western Motors to the South Western Housing Society who commissioned Moxley, Jenner and Company to build two blocks of flats, later called Irving House and Terry House, where the old stage area had been. The site of the old front-of-house area became a petrol station called now "The Prince's Service Station".

Reviewing its history we may ask how important was the Prince's. There can be no doubt that it was a theatre which pleased all who appeared there. Clarkson Rose, for example, recalled with pleasure the intimate relationship of dress circle and stage. But the Prince's was not remarkable for any major innovation in theatre practice and its architecture, though always pleasant, was never unique. Very similar theatres could be found in almost every town in Britain. The Prince's managers were good but they are rarely, if ever, referred to in biographies of the major stars who played there.<sup>35</sup> Apart from Irving's *Brewster* in

35. Ironically Desmond M. Chute, who played little part in the Prince's history, does figure in national biographies. A gifted artist, musician, writer and thinker, he was a strong influence on Stanley Spencer and Eric Gill and knew personally most of the major literary figures of his day. When he died the poet Ezra Pound made a special journey to be present at his funeral. He was an excellent priest too. Walter Shewring records that a five-minute audience with Pope Pius XI lasted half-an-hour.

*Waterloo* and Coward's first play *The Young Idea* no significant performance was first seen at the Prince's, and its resident playwrights, like Rennie Palgrave, achieved fleeting success rather than lasting fame. Nationally, the Prince's was of small importance and its passing, if noticed at all, can have been little regretted.

Locally the judgement must be very different. Speaking at a Hibernian Society dinner the Bishop of Clifton said: "The President (J.M. Chute) is a great public educationalist. He largely controls the public factor for good in our midst".<sup>36</sup> The Bishop's remarks are more than generous praise of one man; they reveal the true importance of the Prince's Theatre. In the age before television, before radio, before the cinema, the gramophone record and the major development of the public library lending system, when the University College was still a weak and small institution, the programme at the Prince's Theatre must have, in a very real sense, corresponded closely with the intellectual map of Bristol. The plays, operas and their music were almost the sole intellectual nourishment available. The result was that for the crowds that attended the funeral of James Macready Chute in 1912 and for the many members of the audience who wrote to the newspapers on its anniversaries the Prince's was more than a theatre. It was something which had opened up for them a new world of the imagination. Prince's patrons of all ages recall in detail what they saw there: Martin Harvey as Sydney Carton, Benson's Shakespeare seasons, the pantomime transformation scenes. They all confess to the life-long influence the theatre had upon them. Perhaps two examples will indicate the strength of feeling.

In 1967 Jim Harris — writing in the *Evening Post* — could recall every detail of the ending of Wilson Barrett's *The Sign of the Cross*, the queues stretching from the theatre to the top of Park Street in one direction and to the bottom of Lodge Street in the other, and the long lines of pair-horsed carriages with coachmen and footmen waiting for their employers to emerge — events seen sixty years earlier. The much younger Arthur Sibley in the same newspaper recalled being forced against his will one wet afternoon to go to the Prince's when he would have preferred to

Desmond's mother knelt beside him in ecstasy. (Private communication from Ken Pople.)

36. *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 20 March 1907.

watch Bristol City play football. Marie Tempest and Leon Quartermaine in *Dear Octopus* held him spellbound. "From there on," he recalled, "I was theatre mad. My passion for the Theatre and Drama has continued unabated, so I am grateful to the Prince's for that wet afternoon's experience" (20 October 1967).

Mr. Harris and Mr. Sibley were not unique: they were typical. There seems scarcely a Bristolian who was alive and sentient by 1940 who does not recall with affection all sorts of shows but especially the Prince's Pantomimes. When they speak of these performances now, some forty, fifty, sixty or more years later, the light of that magic dances again in their eyes. A theatre which is so vividly recalled over forty years after its destruction was certainly special. Buildings alone rarely generate such love. What people remember is an age of innocence full of great stars, an intellectual awakening, a place where they were touched by a glory that has stayed with them all their lives. It is that that makes the Prince's important in the history of Bristol. And perhaps the Prince's was fortunate too in the way that it ended — in a fury of flame having just played host to one of England's greatest stage personalities. It avoided the sordid fate as a bingo hall, car showroom or supermarket which befell so many of its contemporaries across the country. James Henry Chute, George Macready Chute, James Macready Chute and Abigail Philomena Chute, who believed so thoroughly in the value of the drama, would not have wished it otherwise. They and their beloved Prince's have no public memorial in Bristol. As long as anyone who remembers the Prince's lives they do not need one.

### Sources

The main sources for this account have been the Bristol newspapers and journals of the time, particularly the *Times and Mirror*, *The Western Daily Press* and the *Magpie*. G. Rennie Powell's book *The Bristol Stage* (Bristol Printing and Publishing Company Limited 1919) is an invaluable, if uncritical, record of the Prince's Theatre 1867 – 1918. Guy Tracey Watts' book *Theatrical Bristol* (Hollaway and Son Limited, Bristol 1913) supplies a less substantial and very hostile account of the Prince's in the same period. Harvey Crane's *Playbill* (MacDonald and Evans 1980) gives an account of Plymouth theatre at this time which was interesting to compare with the Bristol situation. For the national theatre picture,



George Rowell's *Theatre in the Age of Irving* (Blackwell 1981); J.C. Trewin's *Edwardian Theatre* (Blackwell 1976), Phyllis Hartnoll's *Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Oxford University Press, 3rd edition 1967) were especially useful. For the rest I have relied on the standard biographies of the great "stars" from Sullivan and Irving to Wolfitt, Coward and Novello, the theatre's own programmes and publicity material, and the personal recollections of its patrons.

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